Islam

Islam stands as one of the major religions of the world and may possibly be the major religion of the world. Like Christianity and Buddhism, it is an international cultural form that is integrally rooted in the culture of a single people, the Arabs. Unlike Christianity and Buddhism, however, Islam has maintained strong cultural roots in its Arabic origins even down to the language of its foundation. While no Christian alive knows a single word of Christ's teachings in the Aramaic or Hebrew that Christ spoke, and only a few Buddhists can move easily within the Pali that Siddhartha spoke, nearly every Muslim from Muhammad to the present day begins and ends each day with the magisterial cadences of the Arabic words spoken by Muhammad as revelation. The sacred text of the Muslims, the Qur'an, or "Recitation," is, unlike either the New Testament or the teachings of Buddha, absolutely authoritative and subject to no questions since its redaction only a couple decades after the death of Muhammad. The Christian New Testament, in contrast, circulated in numerous and contradictory formats so that the present version is highly suspect and frequently inharmonious; the various schools of Buddhism are often at loggerheads over the legitimacy of various teachings--these disputed teachings sometimes form the core of separate movements. In addition to language and text, at the heart of Islam is the Arabic vision of the world and society. Codified only a couple hundred years after the foundation of Islam, the **Shari'ah**, or law of Islam installed permanently the Arabic order of society on subsequent generations. The genius of Islam, then, is fundamentally the genius of the Arabs; the cadences of Islam are the cadences of the Arabic language; the universe of Islam was one forged in the mind of Arabic culture. This is the heritage that we'll explore over countless centuries, this diffusion of Arabic genius throughout the Middle East, Africa, Europe, India, China, and finally, the Americas as a late but integral chapter in the African Diaspora.

We will first start, however, with the Arabs themselves: merchants, raiders, nomads, and city-dwellers, living at the crossroads of empires and cultures. For Arabic culture was a "multiculture," as nomadic, tribal Arabs lived side by side with Jews, Greeks, Christians, and Persians. The unique character of Islam and the real genius of Muhammad will involve the fusion of the multiple cultures into a coherent whole, a vision of the universe and human life that would eventually become the dominant social and religious reality in the human world.

But what is Islam as a faith? How can it be simplified or reduced to a single system? Unlike Christianity and Buddhism, reducing Islam as faith to a single set of principles is relatively easy because the faith has remained relatively intact from its origins to the present day in its fundamentals. While one can clearly distinguish foundational Christianity as a belief system from early Christianity, and modern Christianity as a set of beliefs appears to have almost nothing in common with either foundational or early Christianity, there's a remarkable coherence in the historical development of Islam. While one can speak of foundational Islam and distinguish this from later Islam, for the most part the similarities between the two outnumber the differences. One finds, then, that a definition of foundational Islam as represented in the Qur'an and in the sayings and actions of Muhammad, called the **Sunnah**, can more or less be applied to Islam as a whole.

Foundational Islam has the following characteristics:

- Islam is monotheistic. The overwhelming message of Islam is that there is one and only one god, that this god is single and unified (**tawhid**). This thesis is represented in the first half of the Muslim testament of faith: "there is no god but god." The primary duty of humanity is to remember that there is only one god in all one's thoughts, words, and actions; this remembrance, which is the cornerstone of Islam, is called **dhikr**. Islam, however, does not reject other religions. Fundamental to the Islamic message is that all religions are based on the singularity and unity of God; some religions, however, have fallen away from this message (such as Christianity which divides God into Father and Son), but the essential message of all religions is this unity of God.
- Islam is creationist. The universe in Islam is a creation of God and is separate from God. The relationship of the world (including humanity) to God is the relationship between created and creator. While God is not present in the world (immanentalism), still the world reflects the nature and guidance of God.

- Islam is transcendentalist. Although God created the universe, God is still absolutely separate from creation to postulate that God was part of the changeable world would be to contradict the unity, singularity, and unchangeableness of God. Transcendentalism, however, postulates more than just an absolute separation. It also describes a relationship between the creator god and creation. In a transcendental relationship, the transcendent term (God) is absolutely independent of the non-transcendent term (creation); however, the non-transcendent term (creation) only has existence, meaning, or value in relationship to the transcendent term (God). To say that God is transcendent in Islam is to say that God is separate, distinct, and independent from the created universe, but that the created universe, though entirely separate from God, is nonetheless dependent on God for its existence and value.
- Islam is rationalistic. At the foundation of Islam is the principle of **iman** or faith. This word, however, is untranslatable into English or other European languages since "faith" is rooted in Christianity. In Christianity, faith is "super-rational," that is, it exists above the level of rationality; human rationality is construed as fundamentally useless foundational Christianity ("the wisdom of the world is the wisdom of fools"). Islam, however, postulates that rationality is the highest function given to human beings and that no "faith" is legitimate without it. What iman means, then, is something closer to "reasoned faith." It is expected that each and every Muslim will carefully weigh the alternatives and, after exercising their reason on the contents of their faith, will be ultimately persuaded of the rightness of their faith.
- Islam is submission. The word, **islam**, means "submission," and a **muslim** is "one who submits." Islam is the submission of one's actions and thoughts to God. In general, submission refers to the ritualistic rules that each and every Muslim must obey; these rituals, however, are primarily symbolic of one's submission to the will of God. Submission to God is displayed in each and every action; the law (**Shari'a**) built off of the text of the Qur'an and the various precepts in the Sunnah is to be obeyed in every respect.
- Islam is androcentric. The most important aspect of creation in Islam is humanity, which is the "viceregent of God on earth." While Islam adopts the Judeo-Christian idea of the fall, humanity is in general glorified in foundational and later Islam. Despite the Fall, humanity has the power to discern the unity of God and the reflection of the nature of God in creation. At the core of the Islamic message is that it is possible for human beings to live a perfect life in relationship to God--the life of Muhammad was one such perfect life and the concern with recording and remembering all of Muhammad's actions argues that each individual Muslim could *imitate* Muhammad. In Islam, the dignity of humanity is one of the most recurring themes of the religion.
- Islam is world-affirming. As a corollary to the generally optimistic view that Islam takes towards humanity, it also construes the created world as fundamentally a good place that was designed for the use and enjoyment of humanity. The use and enjoyment of the world, then, is not a spiritual falling-away, as it is in Christianity, but an active part of the religious life if it is used with the right intention. This includes sexuality, for even Muhammad was married and had sexual relations. This world-affirming aspect of Islam would have far-reaching consequences in the culture of Islam. While Christian Europe, for instance, largely abandoned Greek and Roman science and mercantilism, both of these were preserved and thrived in the Islamic world.
- Islam is an afterlife religion. Strictly speaking, Islam is not a "salvation" religion even though the religion is ruthlessly focused on the afterlife. The goal of individual life is to attain an afterlife within one of the heavens described in the Qur'an and to avoid one of the numerous hells. Salvation religions, however, postulate that admission to paradise or a good afterlife is almost solely in the control of god or some god; in Islam, however, one's afterlife is in large part determined by the sum of one's activities in this life over which **one has complete responsibility**. In that sense, it's not fair to describe Islam as a salvation religion; unlike salvation religions, Islam requires the active, ethical participation of the faithful in every circumstance of the conduct of their lives.

- Islam is eschatological. In the Islamic view of history, time is finite and follows an overall, predetermined course. Each human age begins with the foundation of a new religion founded on the unity of God; each new religion is introduced by a **rasul** or "messenger." Following the introduction of this new monotheism, humanity gradually falls away and the religion becomes corrupt. Periodically, God sends "prophets" to renew the original vigor of the monotheistic religion, but the overall course is a decline in the monotheistic vision. At the lowest stage of decline, God sends another "messenger" that renews monotheism by creating a new religion; the sixth "messenger" was Jesus Christ and the seventh, and last, was Muhammad. At the end of the seventh period, when the new religion has declined, history will come to an end. At the end of history, all humans will be judged based on the contents of their lives, both in terms of faith, submission, and ethical actions, and will be permanently assigned to a place of punishment or one of many paradises.
- Islam is ethical. Like Christianity, foundational Islam is overwhelmingly concerned with individuals as ethical agents. The Qur'an itself deals primarily with two subjects: the unity of God and human ethical responsibilities to the community. In addition, the Sunnah, being both sayings *and* actions of Muhammad, is meant to be a guide to practical living in the here and now. The Qur'an, then, in most of its history has been primarily used as a guide for behavior and social organization. Unlike foundational Christianity, the ethical imperatives of Islam are communal rather than individualistic.
- Islam is societistic. Perhaps stemming from the fact that Islam arises in a predominately tribal culture organized around kinship lines, the religion is primarily focused on the community and society rather than the individual. While the individual is responsible for his or her salvation, Islam requires that each individual participate in the moral life of the community. If one were to sum up the societistic responsibility of the Muslim it would be this: it is incumbent on each Muslim to "islamicize" society, that is, to bring the life of society in line with the ethical philosophy contained in the Qur'an and the Sunnah.
- Islam is primarily exoteric. Islam is primarily an exoteric religion: it is focussed on the community of the faithful rather than limited to exceptional individuals. The rituals and ethical guidelines are meant for everybody and salvation through individual exertion is available to all. Foundational and later Islam, however, does recognize a hierarchy among the faithful: there are the "nobility," or spiritually more perfect, and the "common" faithful, or spiritually less perfect.
- Islam is both exterioristic and interioristic. Islam requires of its believers both an outward and an inward conformance to the rules and practices of the faith. Unlike foundational Christianity, Islam doesn't fully reject the rigorous and faithful observance of rituals and ethical practices, but like Christianity, Islam understands that these rituals and ethical practices can be done mechanically, that is, that they don't reflect the interior state of the individual. For this reason, Islam requires that all rituals and behaviors be accompanied by the "right intention." While this can't be measured by exterior actions, anyone wo doesn't perform the rituals and ethical behaviors are certainly proving that they don't have the right intentions.
- Islam is egalitarian. Like Christianity, Islam is based on the fundamental notion that each human being is spiritually equal to every other human being in the eyes of God. The rituals of Islam, from daily prayers to the pilgrimage to Mecca, are meant to stress this spiritual egalitarianism. This spiritual egalitarianism, however, does not mean social egalitarianism. Social distinctions and subordination, such as the subordination of women to men, are seen as necessary to the maintenance of society, order, and morality.

Pre-Islamic Arabic Culture

In the history of the world, no cultural or linguistic group looms larger than Semitic peoples. Originating from the Arabian peninsula, the Semitic people are responsible for the first civilizations, three major world religions, and a set of cultural practices that have been more globalized or universalized than

any other peoples, including the Chinese and Europeans.

Semitic people erupt on the world stage three times: with the growth of Semitic civilizations in Mesopotamia four thousand years ago, the spread of Christianity and Judaism two thousand years ago, and finally, the explosion of Islam fifteen hundred years ago--this last eruption of Semitic culture would produce the major world religion and social system of the modern period.

The Land

All Semitic people have their beginnings in the Arabian peninsula; but the great Semitic cultures and civilizations of the early period belong to emigrants, all those who left the Arabian peninsula for Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Africa. It is a great irony of history, then, that the most influential of Semitic cultures would not come from an emigrant people, but from Semites living in the very heart of their origin place.

The Arabian peninsula is probably the last place one would nominate as a cradle of the most influential of human cultures, for it is a harsh and demanding place to live. As a landmass, it is separated from its parent continent, Africa, and from Asia by the Red Sea in the west and the Persian Gulf in the east. Although it is surrounded on three sides by water, there are no good harbors, save for Aden, and both the Red Sea and Persian Gulf can be treacherous. The overwhelming geographical aspect of the Arabian peninsula is water, or rather the lack of water.

The Arabian peninsula can be divided into two distinct climactic and geographical zones. In the south is an area along the coast of the Arabian Sea that gets regular rain and has an astonishing variety of plant life. This is the Arabia of our mythology, the Arabia of wealth, tropical plants, cities, frankincense and myrrh. From a very early period, the south of Arabia was heavily populated by sedentary populations living in cities and relying on agriculture. Many of these civilizations were very wealthy and powerful, and Semitic peoples in Africa largely owe their origin to these privileged southerners.

Northern Arabia, that is, all of Arabia north of the southern coast, is one of the most inhospitable places on earth. To the east is a vast desert--one of the largest continuous areas of sand in the world, bordered by arid steppes in the west. The western portion of northern Arabia consists of mountains and steppes. Across this vast land, there are no rivers to connect peoples together. While the people in the south have historically lived close together and in constant contact, the people in the north live far apart and in relative isolation.

The most forbidding part of northern Arabia is the expanse of sand desert on the eastern side. There is little or no precipitation and so no support for agriculture--the only substantial flora in eastern Arabia is the date palm, a plant magnificently adapted to an arid climate. This area throughout almost all of human history has been inhabited by nomadic, pastoralist Arabs called Bedouins who lived in small, tightly-knit tribal groups. The western coast is slightly less forbidding and the Arabs that settled there lived in sedentary and larger tribal groups.

These two regions, the south and the north, were homes to two entirely separate Semitic peoples: the Sabaeans in the south and the Arabs in the north.

The Sabaeans

Also called the Himyarites or the Yemenites, the Sabaeans had from a very early period adopted a sedentary way of life in the relatively lush climate of southern Arabia. Eventually, the south came under the control of city-states ruled by priest-kings called **mukkarib** whose functions may have been very similar to the earliest kings of Sumer and Akkad. By the first millennium AD however, these priest-kings had largely given way to a secular monarchy, the **malik**.

The four most powerful city-states of the south were Saba' (whence the name, Sabaeans), Hadramawt, Qataban, and Ma'in, all located in the southwest of the Arabian peninsula, the area with the heaviest rainfall in all of Arabia. Although the south never formed a political or ethnic unity, the most powerful of all these city-states was Saba', which slowly expanded its political influence to include all the major kingdoms of the south by 300 AD.

For much of its history, the area around Saba', Hadramawt, Qataban, and Ma'in was a center of incredible wealth legendary all throughout the Fertile Crescent and northern Africa. It was an area of exotic plants, spices and luxury items that gained high prices in commerce all throughout the

Mediterranean and Asia. Its most lucrative export was frankincense, which in ancient times grew only in Hadramawt and in the Sabaean colony of Somalia in Africa.

The Sabaeans, however, lived on two major two trade routes: one was the ocean-trading route between Africa and India. The harbors of the southwest were centers of commerce with these two continents and the luxury items, such as spices, imported from these countries. But the Sabaean region also lay at the southern terminus of land-based trade routes up and down the coast of the Arabian peninsula. Goods would travel down this land-route to be exported to Africa or India and goods from Africa and India would travel north on this land-route.

This latter trade route had tremendous consequences for the Arabs in the north and the subsequent history of Islam. For all along this trade route grew major trading cities and the wealth of the south filtered north into these cities. It was in one such Arabian city, Mecca, that Islam would begin.

However, by the seventh century AD , the south had fallen into political disarray. While it had been isolated from invasion by both the ocean and a forbidding wall of mountains, it came to the interest of several competing forces, both political and cultural. The region underwent pressures by Judaizing and Christianizing forces and would finally be invaded in 520 AD by the Christian state of Ethiopia. It was into this wealthy but politically anarchic area that Islam would spread from the north a century later.

The Arabs

The Arabs of the north were ethnically one people but were composed of two culturally opposite groups: nomadic and sedentary Arabs. The harshness of the environment forced on Arabs a nomadic, tribal existence. Agriculture was out of the question; instead, the nomadic Arabs, called **Bedouins**, were pastoralists and moved their herds from place to place in search of scarce resources and water. They lived in small, tightly-knit hereditary tribes.

Sedentary Arabs were themselves Bedouin who had settled the oases that surround the periphery of the Arabian desert -- many of these settlements were very recent. Because the oases represented a concentration of scarce resources, the control of these areas were the result of military campaigns and this control was regularly threatened.

Since the oases were both at the periphery of Bedouin migrations and represented scarce resources, the Bedouin were unable to seize possession of these areas until more powerful political rivals, such as Mesopotamia and the Sabaeans, had become weaker or more diffuse. It really was not until the first millennium BC that the many of the major sedentary Arab settlements were established. So by the time of Islam, the culture of sedentary Arabs was still very close to that of their nomadic cousins.

The settlements also lay on the trade route that connected Africa and India with the Mediterranean world through southern Arabia. The power and prosperity of the sedentary Arabs largely derived from their position as intermediaries in this trade.

There are three distinct historical periods for pre-Islamic sedentary Arabs. The first period begins with the decline of the Greek Seleucids in the Middle East and the decline in power of the southern Sabaeans; the Arabs penetrate as far north as Petra and as far south as Najran, taking advantage of the military vacuum in both these areas. As the Arabs begin to approach the Mediterranean itself, they run into Rome going in the opposite direction.

The expansion of Roman, and then Byzantine, and then Sabaean power begins the second period of pre-Islamic Arabia: the period of client-states. During this period, Arab cities found themselves as client and tributary states to three major world powers: the Byzantine empire in the north, the Persians in the east, and the southern Arabic kingdom of Himyar (the Sabaeans). During this period, both Christianity and Judaism spread rapidly among the Arabs. Some cities, such as Yathrib, become Judaized cities while a large number become Christian -- either Monophysite Christianity of Africa and Syria or the eastern Christianity of Byzantium. No matter what its origin, however, the Arabs experienced Christianity as a **Semitic** religion. Still, even among non-Christian and non-Judaized Arabs, both Judaism and Christianity had very fully penetrated Arabic culture by the beginning of the third period of pre-Islamic history.

The third period was concentrated in inner Arabia, particularly the city of Mecca. This was the period of the efflorescence of Bedouin culture and military power. The Bedouins not only became a military power in their own right, they also closely allied themselves with the central Arabian cities, such

as Yathrib and Mecca. This was the period when classical Arabic, or **al-Arabiyya**, became the language of Arabic culture and poetry. This period saw the diffusion of Bedouin values, such as the value of **muru'a**, or manliness, and the widespread diffusion of Bedouin narratives and poetry.

The most important of these Bedouin achievements, however, was the conquest of Mecca by the tribe of the Quraysh around 500 AD. Mecca had already become a religious center of Arabic culture as its name suggests -- one possible derivation of the name, "Mecca," is the word, "makorba," or "temple." The religion of the pre-Islamic Arabs was a mixture of Bedouin polytheism, Judaism, and a little bit of Christianity. The pre-Islamic Arabs worshipped three goddesses, al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat, who were all daughters of one god, Allah -- this one god was probably derived from the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity. Mecca was the center of this religion with its **Ka'ba**, or "Cube," which served as the temple for the religion.

This third period, however, would end dramatically with the reassertion of Semitic power and culture over the area of western Asia and Mesopotamia. This last period of Semitic history would be its greatest and turn it into what is perhaps the most significant culture of human history. It is a historical shift that can be dated and placed with extreme precision -- for this last stage in Arabic history begins with one person: Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah.

Muhammad, Messenger of God

It was in Mecca that a relatively obscure, forty-year old citizen named Muhammad from a lower clan began to preach a new religion. In 610 AD Muhammad revealed to his closest relatives that he had been asked by the voice of God to recite a new message to the world. He initially kept this message private among his closest relatives; three years later, however, they would persuade him to carry his recitation to a wider audience. These recitations, which Muhammad would later come to consider to be the voice of an intermediary of God, would form the heart and soul of Islam: the **Qur'an**, or "Recitation."

Muhammad considered himself a "Messenger of God," or rasul Allah -- a messenger of God in Islam does more than just carry a message to God's people, a messenger carries an entirely new and revivifying message to humanity. It was as a *rasul Allah* that the life of Muhammad would come down to us. Of his forty years of life before the Recitation, the only sources we have are oral traditions that construct that early life in the context of his great calling.

We do know that he came from a relatively poor clan, the Hashim, that was, in fact, the clan that headed the opposition to the wealthy merchant clans. He was born after the death of his father -- this meant that he could inherit none of his father's property so he grew up in poverty. He became the servant and at the age of twenty-five married a wealthy widow, Khadija.

Muhammad's poverty in his youth and the social tensions in Mecca with bitter divisions resulting from the unequal distribution of wealth among the clans became significant aspects of the message of Islam. While the message of the Qur'an is universal, it is also very historically specific in its content and the traditions surrounding its content. The message that Muhammad delivered was meant for very specific circumstances and many of the revelations would address specific concerns addressed to Muhammad. As far as the division of wealth and Muhammad's poverty, one of the fundamental messages of the *Qur'an* is the emphasis on material welfare and the entire community's responsibility for the material welfare of all its members.

Mecca 610-622 AD

While Muhammad gained several followers in Mecca, the wealthiest and most powerful clans bitterly opposed the new religion. The revelations recited by Muhammad were often specifically directed against the most powerful clans, particularly in the direct commands to redistribute wealth. Because of this opposition to the wealthy clans, Muhammad's new religion largely appealed to the unfortunate of Mecca: foreigners who were not protected by any clan, members of poor clans, and the children of the wealthiest clans who had fallen out of favor or somehow lost their inheritance.

At first, though opposed to the religion, the wealthiest clans took a wait-and-see attitude. As the religion gained followers, the wealthiest clans tried to appropriate Muhammad for themselves, offering him a wealthy marriage and entrance into the most powerful merchant clans if he would stop preaching

his new religion. When that didn't work, the wealthy clans brought pressure on Muhammad's clan, the Hashim, to force him to stop his recitations. But the Hashim were led by Muhammad's uncle, Abu Talib, who sided with Muhammad. The wealthy clans then boycotted the Hashim and tried to force them economically to give over this new religion.

Although he was supported by his clan and although his message was fundamentally opposed to the attitude and practices of the wealthy clans, Muhammad seems to have tried to make some peace with these clans in the first decade. It was this attempt to make peace that the incident of the **Satanic verses** took place. Seeking some accommodation, Muhammad seems to have sought to reconcile his new religion with the traditional religion of Mecca by incorporating other gods -- the three gods of Meccan religion: al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat. It would later be revealed to Muhammad that these Quranic verses had been sent to him by Satan and were thus deceptions. When Muhammad recanted these verses as Satanic, the wealthiest clans turned against him bitterly and would attempt no more reconciliation.

The opening came with the death of Abu Talib in 619; the Hashimite clan fell under the leadership of Abu Lahab who dismissed Muhammad from the protection of the clan. What this meant was that anyone could do anything to Muhammad and the clan would not seek revenge--for all effects and purposes, Muhammad had fallen outside the protection of any law. Muhammad desperately sought for protection under other clans, but they all refused.

Then one day in 620, Muhammad met with six men from Yathrib. These men were so impressed that they would later lead a larger delegation to meet with Muhammad and discuss both his revelations and the possibility of his moving to Yathrib.

Medina 622-628 AD

Yathrib at the time was torn apart by clan violence. The city consisted of a majority of Arabic clans and a minority of Jewish clans--although the two groups had separate religions, they were little different culturally or ethnically. It was largely through blood-feuds that the violence in Yathrib slowly spread--by 618, these blood-feuds erupted into all-out war involving almost every clan.

These circumstances in part explain the readiness of the inhabitants of Yathrib to accept a new religion. But the overwhelming selling point was Muhammad himself and the message he spoke. In 621, five of the original six returned again to Mecca and brought along seven more men. Again, they were so impressed that they swore to follow this new religion. These twelve then persuaded over seventy-five fellow citizens to meet Muhammad again in 622 -- these seventy-five swore to both follow the new religion and fight for Muhammad.

Muhammad now had the protection he so desperately needed for his followers and he put into motion the emigration of his followers from Mecca to Yathrib, which he renamed **Medina**. However, he had to be cautious--if the wealthy clans got wind of his plans, they would interpret it as a threat and would use any means to stop it. So Muhammad had his followers gradually leave the city while he remained behind with his father-in-law, Abu Bakr, and his son-in-law, Ali. The ruse worked -- while his followers left the city, the powerful clans suspected nothing.

Leaving the city would be more difficult. Once he left the city, Muhammad knew that the Meccans would track him down quickly. Under cover of night he left the city for some caves above the city. Here he hid out until the Meccans stopped searching the roadways for him--after three days he set out to Medina along the least-traveled roads. This journey to Medina was the **Hijra** and it is from this year that the Muslim calendar begins. While normally translated "pilgrimage," *Hijra* means something like "severing relational ties" (the closest English equivalent I can think of is, "running away from home" or "divorcing your relatives").

In Medina, he was greeted with enthusiasm. Here Muhammad was in part called on to mediate disputes between rival clans. And it was here that the Recitation profoundly changed character. While the Meccan revelations concerned themselves with general ethics and spiritual matters, the Medinan verses are more concerned with ethical and political questions. While the Meccan verses address the question of how to make one's life right with God, the Medinan revelations address the question of building and maintaining a community with a common religious tie.

It was also in the Medinan years that Muhammad turned his religion away from Judaism and the

Jews. In Mecca and in the early years in Medina, Muhammad tried to incorporate Jews into both the recitations and the community of Islam. The tensions in Medina, however, translated into a series of rejections of Judaism and Jews. The final blow came when Muhammad, at prayer, suddenly had a verse revealed to him that believers should not pray to Jerusalem but to Mecca. He then ordered his congregation to turn completely around (Mecca is 180 degrees in the opposite direction from Jerusalem when you're in Medina); symbolically, the gesture signified that Islam had broken completely from Judaism.

In both the Islamic and the Western world, there is a great deal of controversy regarding Muhammad's attitude towards Mecca. Whether or not he planned to go to war with Mecca, he soon became engaged in activities that would guarantee a war between Medina and Mecca.

He began with raids on Meccan trading caravans. At first these raids, or **razzia**, were only carried out by the Meccan emigrants. As they began to rack up a few successes, they were soon joined by Medinans, who were called Ansar, or "Helpers."

Battle with the Meccans was inevitable, and in 624 (year 2 in the Muslim calendar), Muhammad, with only 300 men, defeated a Meccan force of over 900 men at Badr, the single most significant battle in Islamic history. A series of battles followed until the Meccans laid siege to Medina in 627. Arabs, however, prosecuted warfare through the use of raids -- unused to laying siege, the Meccans gave it over in a little over a day.

The failure of the Medinan siege left the Meccans with no prestige left, particularly among those, such as the Persians and the southern Arabians, who would be inspired to fight for them. Muhammad re-entered Mecca as a pilgrim in 628; in 620 (year 8 on the Muslim calendar), Muhammad re-entered Mecca as its conqueror.

The Last Years 628-632 AD

He was a disenfranchised son of a poor clan. He had received messages from God and established a new religion. Cast out from his clan's protection, he fled to Medina where his religion grew quickly. And now he had returned to Mecca as the head of a growing political unit, in fact, a germinating empire. He turned his attention to dealing with other Arabian tribes. His goal was in part to protect his community and in part an effort to unify the Arabian tribes. When he beat a group of tribes, the Hawazin, he became the most powerful military presence in Arabia.

As Muhammad brought various tribes and cities into alliance, at first he demanded that the people acknowledge Islam and his role as the messenger of God. These were not normal political alliances, but *tribal* alliances. As Islam expanded, this tribal character would not admit non-Arabs into the same structure -- non-Arabs allied themselves to Islam by being a **mawali**, or "client' of a tribe.

But the Islamic peace in Arabia was only a peace at the surface. There was still much opposition among the tribes; along the Persian Gulf, for instance, most of the tribes and clans were non-Islamic and towards Syria the tribes allied themselves with the Byzantine empire. The last two years of Muhammad's life were largely spent dealing with these internal threats to the Islamic peace.

In his last year of life, Muhammad led a great pilgrimage or **Hajj** to the Ka'aba in Mecca. This final gesture gave to Islam the last of its fundamental obligations. Three months later he died.

Although he had bequeathed a religion on his people and had brilliantly conquered and ruled over an Arabian unity founded in the city of Mecca, he left no political mechanism in place for either political or religious succession. Who would rule in his place? Who could keep the alliances together? Most importantly, what would happen to the religion he founded? Since Muhammad was a source of constant revelation, what would happen to the Islamic world when cast adrift from the source of their religious ideas and revelation?

This would occupy the Islamic mind for the first decades after Muhammad's death. Two things result from this: an Islamic empire stretching across Africa to Europe itself and, the greatest of all Islamic achievements, the Qur'an.

The Qur'an

The Qur'an (in Anglicized form: *Koran*) is certainly the greatest literary work in classical Arabic

and for all Muslims stands as the definitive word of God (in Arabic: *Allah*) spoken to the prophet **Muhammad** by the angel Gabriel. When reading the *Qur'an*, you should realize that, for all Muslims, the text you are reading is quite literally the voice of God; because the *Qur'an* is the direct speech of God in Arabic, translation of the work is seen as blasphemy, as an unforgivable tampering with God's own speech. Nevertheless, the *Qur'an* has been translated into Turkish and Farsi (the language of Iran) in this century and is recited in these languages in religious services in Turkey and Iran. The Muslim community tolerates this but just barely. For all practical purposes, to be Muslim, then, means almost universally to be able to read and understand classical Arabic, despite what one's native language is.

The recitation began one night in the year 610 A.D., when Muhammad, born in Medina in 570, was asleep in Ramadan; a voice from heaven called out to him with the command, "Recite! Recite! Recite!" The angel recited three verses to him and when he awoke he had these verses, as he said, inscribed in his heart. From that point on, Muhammad believed himself to be a prophet and messenger of God, the last in a line of seven prophets (beginning with Abraham and ending with Jesus Christ, who was prophet number six) and responsible for inscribing the last and most important of God's direct messages to the world, the Arabic Recitation, which is the full name of the work. The people of God, that is, the Jews and the Christians, were going astray; the purpose of the Arabic Recitation was to restore God's faithful to the proper path. At different times in Muhammed's life the recitations would come to him; he would then repeat what he had heard and these would be memorized by certain people trained in remembering verses; some of these verses were written down on whatever was at hand. All these writings were collected in the caliphate of 'Uthman and the canonical text was established around 650 A.D. The writings were collected into a group of surah's and ordered according to length (each surah is meant to be a single recitation), though all Muslims also know the chronological order of the recitations.

The *Qur'an* is organized into separate chapters called **surahs**. The order of the surahs, however, does not reflect the chronological order of the Quranic verses, nor does the surah structure reflect the nature of the original Quranic revelation. During his lifetime, Muhammad would have individual verses revealed to him; these revelations occurred unexpectedly and in surprising places. Typically, revelation would put Muhammad in a trance-like state. He, and others, would memorize the revealed verses and, under the guidance of Gabriel, Muhammad organized these verses into the existing surahs. The intervention of Gabriel in ordering the various verses in Islamic history is meant to guarantee not only the sanctity of the individual verses, but the religious validity of the organization of these verses in the *Qur'an*.

The *Qur'an* was an oral text throughout the lifetime of Muhammad; it was also a fluid text. The complete text resided only in the memories of Muhammad and his followers. As he added verses and reorganized the text, his followers would re-memorize the text in the light of the additions or edits. This means that the *Qur'an* was a living text during the lifetime of Muhammad. Certain verses revealed to Muhammad were later repudiated by him as "satanic" verses revealed not by Gabriel but by Satan. These verses were expunged from the text that so many had memorized.

After the death of Muhammad, the text of the *Qur'an* was written down in the caliphate of Abu Bakr. Until 'Uthman, one and only one written text existed. For over a decade after the death of Muhammad, the *Qur'an* remained primarily an oral text in the memories of the faithful. In Islamic accounts of the history of the *Qur'an*, this oral text was entirely faithful to the original verses -- this is entirely possible, but Western historians generally agree that some corruptions must have produced slight variations throughout the Islamic world. Nevertheless, the military expansion of Islam led to two direct consequences concerning the integrity of the Quranic text. First, large numbers of the faithful were dying out in the various military expeditions. Each time someone died who had the Quranic text memorized, that meant that one copy of the *Qur'an* disappeared forever. Second, the expansion of Islam swelled the ranks of the faithful. Many of these new converts spoke other languages and the original Arabic of the *Qur'an* began to corrupt. Faced with these two threats to the integrity of the *Qur'an* , 'Uthman orderd a **recension** of the text to be made and to serve as the definitive written version of the text. A recension is a version of a text that is assembled from all the variant versions of that text. 'Uthman, however, relied on two sources: the written text that had been ordered by Abu Bakr and that still existed, and the various oral

texts of Muslims who memorized it during the lifetime of Muhammad. In Islamic history, there is no variation between these two sources, so the Uthmanic "recension" is largely a codifying of a single version of a text. This version, the **Uthmanic recension**, is the version of the *Qur'an* that has remained, unchanged, the central holy text of Islam.

The Qur'an has one overriding theme, endlessly repeated and elaborated throughout the text: complete submission (in Arabic: *islam*; *muslim* means "one who submits") to the word and the will of God, who is one God and the only God. The God of Islam is both a stern judge and endlessly forgiving; obedience to God wipes away all transgression. This submission, however, must be fully and rationally given; faith (*iman*) is a rational consent to the truth of the word of God. Therefore, much of the *Qu'ran* concerns the word of God and how it is received and believed, or not received and believed as the case may be. As you read the text, try to identify the central ethical and religious principles. How are people supposed to behave towards one another? How is the human world divided? What human activities indicate faith? What is the role of mercy? What is the role of violence? What theory of history seems to animate this account? Why do people choose not to believe the prophets from Allah? In particular, the "theme" of this surah is the nature of Allah's "signs"? What are these signs? What guarantees their truth? Why are they called "manifest"? Why do they not convince the unbelievers?

You may find the text a bit disorganized and repetitious; the compositional principle of the *Qur'an* is called in Arabic, *haqqiqah*, or "formless essence." This is understood to mean that the various commands, injunctions, and accounts of God take on their fullest meaning by being repeated in several different combinations. This compositional principle becomes an artistic principle in Islamic art and architecture.

The Caliphate

When Muhammad died in 632, he left a political organization that was entirely centered around him. He was a political and military leader *and* he was the source of revelation. When political or social difficulties came up, not only would they center on Muhammad, but sometimes through revelation be mediated by Allah himself.

The central role of Muhammad left the growing Islamic polity with several difficulties. The first was the status of revelation itself--this became settled with the establishment of the definitive *Qur'an*. A more serious problem, though, involved the political and military succession to Muhammad. The only working model was an individual leader, but that leader had the authority of God behind him.

No-one seems to have thought very much about the succession to Muhammad before his death. No-one regarded Muhammad as divine or immortal, but no-one really considered what would happen after his death. The solution was cobbled together by the most powerful followers of Muhammad. There was disagreement -- in fact, violent disagreement -- between the Meccan followers of Muhammad who had emigrated with him in 622 (the **Muhajirun**, or "Emigrants") and the Medinans who had become followers (the **Ansar**, or "Helpers"). In the end, however, Muhammad's father-in-law, Abu Bakr, was named the **khalifa** or "Successor" of Muhammad. A new religion and a new circumstance had formed a new, untried political formation: the **caliphate**.

The Patriarchal Caliphs

The earliest caliphs were relatives and followers of Muhammad himself. Under these four caliphs, the political, social, and religious institutions of Islam would be solidified, including the definitive edition of the *Qur'an*. The world of Islam would expand far beyond the borders of the Arabian peninsula during their tenure--east into the Persian empire, north into Byzantine territory, and west across the face of northern Africa.

Because of their foundational status and the fact that they were direct followers of Muhammad, these first four caliphs are called the patriarchs or **patriarchal caliphs** of Islam. For many Muslims, this was the golden age of Islamic government when a true Islamic polity was in existence; from some Muslims, such as Shi'ite Muslims, this was the *only* period when there was legitimate Islamic government. In this view, the founding of the Umayyad dynasty ushered in more than a millennium of illegitimate government.

Abu Bakr 632-634 AD

Abu Bakr, Muhammad's father-in-law and the father of Muhammad's most beloved wife, 'Aisha, was with Muhammad from the very beginning. Throughout the military campaigns with Mecca and later with other Arabian tribes, Abu Bakr had proven himself to be a military genius. Abu Bakr immediately called for a military expedition against the Byzantine empire, in part to revenge an earlier Islamic defeat and in part to focus Islamic and Arabian attention.

However, as soon as the Arabian tribes heard of the death of Muhammad, the Islamic peace and most of the alliances broke down. Several tribes revolted -- some of these tribes revolted under the leadership of rival prophets. This began the period the Muslims call **al-Ridda**, or "The Apostasy." All of Abu Bakr's energy in the first years would be focused on quelling these rebellions and tenuously re-establishing the Islamic peace.

Once the rebellions had been put down, Abu Bakr began a war of conquest. Whether or not he intended a full-out imperial conquest is hard to say; he did, however, set in motion a historical trajectory that in just a few short decades would lead to one of the largest empires in history. Abu Bakr began with Iraq, but before he could attack the Persian empire itself, he died -- his death came only two years after he had been named the successor of Muhammad.

'Umar 634-644 AD

Abu Bakr desired 'Umar to be his successor and he persuaded the most powerful of the followers of Muhammad to go along. 'Umar was gifted both militarily and politically -- it was his political genius above everything else that had helped to hold the Islamic world together during the life of Muhammad.

'Umar continued the war of conquests begun by Abu Bakr. He pressed into the Persian Empire itself, but he also headed north into Syria and Byzantine territory and west into Egypt. By 640, Islamic military campaigns had brought all of Mesopotamia and most of Syria and Palestine under the control of Abu Bakr. Egypt was conquered by 642 and the Persian Empire by 643. These were some of the richest regions in the world guarded by powerful militaries -- and they fell into Islamic hands in a heartbeat.

'Umar, however, was one of the great political geniuses of history. While the empire was expanding at a mind-numbing rate beneath his leadership, he also began to build the political structure that would hold together the vast empire that was being built. 'Umar did not require that non-Muslim populations convert to Islam nor did he try to centralize government, as the Persians had done. Instead, he allowed subject populations to retain their religion, language, customs, and government relatively untouched. The only intrusion would be a governor (**amir**) and, sometimes, a financial officer called an **'amil**, or agent.

His most far-reaching innovations were in the area of building a financial structure to the empire. He understood that the most important aspect of the empire was a stable financial structure for the government. To this end, he built an efficient system of taxation and brought the military directly under the financial control of the state. He also founded the **diwan**, a unique Islamic institution. The *diwan* consisted of individuals that were important to the Islamic faith and the Islamic world, such as the followers of Muhammad. Their contribution to the faith was so great that they were given pensions to live off of -- this freed them up to pursue religious and ethical studies and so provide religious or ethical leadership to the rest of the Islamic world.

It was 'Umar that fixed many Islamic traditions and practices and he began the process of producing the *Qur'an*. His most lasting tradition, however, was establishing the Muslim calendar. The Muslim calendar, like the Arabian calendar, remained a lunar calendar -- however, he fixed the beginning of the calendar at the year in which Muhammad emigrated to Medina. This, as far as 'Umar was concerned, was the turning point in Islamic history.

'Uthman 644-656 AD

Nearing his death, 'Umar appointed a committee of six men to decide on the next caliph -- they were charged to choose one of their own number. All of the men, like 'Umar, were from the tribe of Quraysh -- ;the Ansar, or Medinans, had been gradually shut out of power.

This committee would prove to be pivotal, for on its choice would eventually grow Islam's first schism. The committee narrowed down the choices to two: 'Uthman and 'Ali. 'Ali was the son-in-law of

Muhammad and had been a companion to the prophet from the inception of his mission. He may also have been named by Muhammad as a successor. "Uthman was an Umayyad, one of the wealthy clans that had bitterly opposed Muhammad. In fact, 'Uthman had started out opposed to Muhammad.

'Uthman, however, was a supremely practical and intelligent military and political leader while 'Ali was fervently devout religious disciple. 'Ali was largely convinced that Islam had gone astray and that it was not following either the religious, ethical, or social principles laid down in Muhammad's revelation. This profound difference between the two candidates led them to choose 'Uthman, for the growing Islamic empire seemed to need a practical, unreligious approach.

The decision was not a popular one. While 'Uthman reigned for twelve years as caliph, he met increasing opposition among both the original followers of Muhammad and among Islamic people in general. This opposition constellated around the figure of 'Ali who would, albeit briefly, succeed 'Uthman as caliph.

Despite internal troubles, 'Uthman continued the wars of conquest so brilliantly carried out by 'Umar. The Islamic empire conquered Libya in North Africa and fully conquered the eastern portions of the Persian Empire.

But unrest grew steadily and precipitously. His government seriously mishandled finances all throughout the empire. In 656, a riot broke out in Medina -- so bitter were the rioters that they even threw stones at 'Uthman. The caliph called for military help. When the news of military reinforcements began to circulate among the rioters, they broke into 'Uthman's house and killed him while he was reading the *Qur'an*.

'Uthman's death was ironic for many reasons, including the fact that he was the first Islamic caliph or leader to be killed by fellow Muslims. But 'Uthman's greatest and most lasting achievement was the formal recension of the *Qur'an*. Until 'Uthman, the *Qur'an* was largely an oral text that was recited by followers who had memorized it. The wars of conquest, however, had thinned their ranks, and the introduction of foreign peoples into Islam threatened the integrity of the text as an *Arabic* text. So 'Uthman ordered that all versions, written and oral, be collected together and a definitive version written down. It is this definitive version which became the central text of Islam and the bedrock on which all Islamic history would be built. And it was this version, this brilliant achievement, that 'Uthman was reciting from when he was killed.

Civil War and the Umayyads

Upon Muhammad's death, a hastily collected group of prominent Muslim leaders elected Muhammad's father in law, Abu Bakr, to be the secular head of Islam. However, 'Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin, was not part of this committee nor were other members of Muhammad's immediate family, and many believed that Muhammad had designated 'Ali as a successor, for the Traditions had Muhammad naming him as both his brother and his successor. 'Ali had been raised with Muhammed and was the second person (after Muhammad's wife Khadija) to recognize Muhammed's role as a prophet; he was the first of Muhammad's tribe to declare himself an apostle (*rasul*). But the Meccan and Medinan leaders, with no members of Muhammad's house present, gave their allegiance to Abu Bakr as CalipH and attempted through force of arms to coerce 'Ali into acknowledging Abu Bakr as well. However, during the Caliphates of Abu Bakr and his successor, 'Umar, not only did 'Ali not advance any claims to the Caliphate, he even participated in the government of 'Umar. It was not until the Caliphate passed to 'Uthman, who ruled somewhat degenerately and was a member of the Umayya family, which had fiercely fought against Muhammad during his lifetime, that 'Ali was provoked into accepting the Caliphate. 'Uthman placed members of his family in charge of various provinces and they ruled disgracefully; various rebel factions, seeing their grievances unredressed, attacked 'Uthman's house and assassinated him. The prominent families of Medina and other areas persuaded 'Ali to become Caliph, which he did in 656; 'Ali had become the fourth Caliph of Islam and the last of the Patriarchal caliphs.

The Umayyads in charge of the various governments would not accept this arrangement and rose up in rebellion and named Mu'awiyya caliph. Eventually, 'Ali would be forced to flee Medina and settle in Kufa in Iraq. 'Ali would eventually have to contend with dissension in his own army while fighting the

Umayyads; after defeating these dissenters in battle, he would be assassinated a few years later by one of them in revenge for this defeat.

From this point onwards, authority was divided in the Islamic world. The Umayyads continued to pass the Caliphate down through the ages among their family; but their now existed in Iraq a separate Islamic community that did not recognize the authority of the Umayyad Caliphs. Rather they recognized only the successors to 'Ali as authorities, and they gave these successors the title **Imam**, or spiritual leader of Islam, both to differentiate their leaders from the more worldly and secular Umayyads and because Abu Muhammad Hasan ibn 'Ali, the second Imam, ceded the Caliphate to the Umayyads. A grand total of ten Imams succeeded 'Ali, passing the Imamate down to their sons in hereditary succession. However, the eleventh Imam, Hasan al-Askari, died without a son, and the Shi'ites were thrown into disarray. Shi'a Islam divided into several different sects, the most important of which was the Qat'iyya ("those who are certain"). The Qat'iyya believed that Hasan al-Askari did indeed have a son, Muhammad al-Mahdi; one of the Qat'iyya sects believed that Muhammad al-Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, had hidden himself and remained in hiding. This sect was called Ithna-'Ashari (Twelver) or Imami (Imam) Shi'a, and was the form of Shi'a that eventually came to exclusively represent Shi'ism.

The Kharjites

The civil war between the followers of 'Ali (**Shi'a 'Ali**) and the Umayyads produced another Islamic faction, the **Kharjites**, which would be a force in early Islamic history. The Kharjites were originally followers of 'Ali who grew disaffected when 'Ali began bargaining with the Umayyads. 'Ali's strength had always been his religious piety and his firm conviction that the Islamic world had strayed from its ethical and religious principles. He attracted followers that were equally devout and equally zealous--when he began to strike bargains with the Umayyads, some of these followers felt that now 'Ali, too, had betrayed Islam. They formed a separate faction, the Kharjites, and took it upon themselves to carry the banner for Islamic purity. One of their most significant first acts was the assassination of 'Ali.

Many people in early Islam agreed in principle with the Kharjites and mourned the steady secularization of the Islamic leadership and the Islamic world. However, many who did not agree with the Kharjites still rallied around them. Throughout the Umayyad and the early Abassid period, the Kharjite movement was the center of almost all the opposition to these two caliphate dynasties. There are still Kharjites around today, mainly in North Africa and southern Arabia, but they were the most significant oppositional group in early Islam.

The Umayyad Dynasty 661-750 AD

The Umayyads do not fare well in Islamic history which tells a tale of an unremitting line degenerate and weak caliphs; western historians have for the most part accepted this history. But the truth may be somewhat grayer. The Umayyads saw a great expansion of Islamic empire and were responsible for building a highly efficient and lasting governmental structure. The Umayyad caliphs could be startlingly brilliant both militarily and politically. And there is no question, that Islamic material and artistic culture has its roots in the Umayyad dynasty and the courts of Umayyad power.

This is not to say that the Umayyad caliphate was not unmarred by degeneracy and downright cruelty. But the Umayyads seem to be fairly uninterested in religious questions or the religious obligations of their position -- it is rather as secular and secularizing rulers that their interest and greatness lies.

Muhammad and the Patriarchal Caliphs integrated themselves closely with the Islamic community -- the entire religion is founded on an unprecedented egalitarianism. These caliphs lived fairly normal and unpretentious lives and did not seek to separate themselves in dress or manner from the community they ruled. Mu'awiyya and the Umayyads, however, adopted models of kingship from surrounding peoples. They separated their court from the Muslim community and surrounded themselves with wealth and ceremony. This was a model of leadership based on the idea that authority was vested in super-normal individuals, a radically different turn of events in the Muslim world. This model, however, is what kept the new empire together. While nomadic and sedentary Arabs were completely accustomed to the tribal patriarchal model that the early caliphs followed, subject populations only understood authority as it was vested in a powerful and distant monarch. Under the Umayyads, then, the caliphate

became something much closer to a monarchy rather than a tribal or religious leadership.

The first Umayyad caliph, Mu'awiyya, also introduced a new method of selecting caliphs. The caliphate was a unique institution in that the caliph was elected by a small group of powerful tribal leaders. Mu'awiyya convinced the most powerful to recognize his son, Yazid, as the next caliph. Technically, Yazid was still elected; in reality, he was selected by his father to succeed him. This would become the model of caliphal succession--the reigning caliph would name his successor and the notable would elect that named successor. So the Umayyad caliphate was essentially a hereditary dynasty. It is for this reason that Islamic historians do not call the Umayyad period a caliphate, but rather use the term "kingdom"

The Umayyads wrought many changes in Islamic government. The most significant of these was the adoption of Byzantine administrative and financial systems. Mu'awiyya had moved the administrative center of Islam from Medina to Damascus in Syria, right in the heart of the Byzantine presence in the Fertile Crescent. He was persuaded by his closest advisors to adopt the Byzantine administration he found in Damascus and he appointed a large number of Byzantine administrators and counselors--almost all of these were Christians.

The establishment of wealth and monarchical trappings led to bitter opposition among many Muslims. It was seen as a fundamental perversion of the religious and social principles of Islam. At the same time, however, the establishment of a monarchical and court culture began an efflorescence of Islamic culture in art, architecture, and writing.

Despite much of the irreligious character of his caliphate, Mu'awiyya was an enormously brilliant and effective ruler. During his tenure, Islam enjoyed twenty years of internal peace and solidified its control over Iraq and Iran. Mu'awiyya was an effective administrator and staffed administrative positions with the best administrators he could find. He also embodied fully the Arabic virtue of **hilm**, or "leniency," and generously forgave even some of his worst enemies. That forgiveness and leniency is what helped to establish the new administrative structure the Umayyads were building.

Second Civil War 680-694

With the death of Mu'awiyya in 680 and the succession of his son, Yazid, a second civil war broke out with the followers of 'Ali. Yazid had some of the administrative effectiveness of Mu'awiyya, but none of the moral restraint and certainly no portion of the *hilm* that characterized his father. Anxious to force 'Ali's son, Husayn, to recognize his authority, Yazid eventually killed Husayn and a handful of his followers at Karbala in Iraq. This intemperate act inspired the people of Medina to revolt -- Yazid put down this revolt and then laid siege to Mecca. In the middle of the siege, however, he died, and the caliphate was bestowed on his adolescent son, Mu'awiyya II. But the young boy soon died and the Islamic world fell into disarray over competing claims to the caliphate -- the hereditary caliphate was still too young in its establishment.

The Arabian people were by now scattered all over the Islamic world. Two tribes based in Syria, the Qays and the Kalb, rallied around two separate candidates for caliph: Marwan ibn al-Hakam and Ibn al-Zubayr. A bitter war was fought between the two tribes and Marwan, backed by the Kalbites, became caliph in 684 and founded a new Umayyad dynasty. But because he died a year later, the reconquest of Islamic lands would fall to his son 'Abd al-Malik, who ruled from 685 to 705 (65-86 AH). When 'Abd al-Malik became caliph, all of Arabia was under the control of his rival, Ibn al-Zubayr, while much of Iraq had fallen under the control of a rebel named al-Mukhtar. al-Mukhtar was defeated by Ibn al-Zubayr and, in 692, 'Abd al-Malik defeated Ibn al-Zubayr at Mecca. So desperate was he for victory, that he showered Mecca and the Ka'aba with catapults and freely destroyed the holy place.

His victory cemented Umayyad control over Islam; however, both the Shi'a and the Kharjites would remain powerful oppositional forces.

The Later Umayyads

With the Islamic world enjoying a measure of stability, Abd al-Malik's son and successor, al-Walid I (705-715 AD, 86-96 AH), began again Islamic conquests and took the early Islamic empire to its farthest extents. He reconquered parts of Egypt from the Byzantines and moved on into Carthage and across to the west of North Africa. Then, in 711, Muslim armies crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and began

to conquer Spain using North African Berber armies. By 716, the Visigoths of Spain had been defeated and Spain was under Muslim control. This would be the farthest extent of Islamic control of Europe -- in 736, they were stopped in their expansion into Europe south of Tours, France. In the east, Islamic armies made it as far as the Indus River in 710 -- under al-Walid, the caliphal empire stretched from Spain to India!

Al-Walid also began the first great building projects of Islam, the most famous of which is the mosque at Damascus. The long history of Islamic architecture really begins with al-Walid. This is also the period, however, in which Islamic court culture begins to germinate. With the caliph as a patron, artists and writers begin to develop a new, partly secular culture based on Islamic ideas.

It was also al-Walid that coupled islamicization with arabicization. Conversion was not forced on conquered peoples; however, since non-believers had to pay an extra tax and were not technically citizens, many people did convert for religious and non-religious reasons. This created several problems, particularly since Islam was so closely connected with being Arab--being Arab, of course, was more than an ethnic identity, it was a tribal identity based on kinship and descent. As more and more Muslims were non-Arabs, the status of Arabs and their culture became threatened. In particular, large numbers of Coptic-speaking (Egypt) and Persian-speaking Muslims threatened the primacy of the very language that Islam is based on. In part to alleviate that threat, al-Walid instituted Arabic as the only official language of the empire. He decreed that all administration was to be done only in Arabic. It was this move that would cement the primacy of Arabic language and culture in the Islamic world.

The Fall of the Umayyads

None of the remaining Marwani caliphs enjoyed long reigns except for Hisham, who ruled from 724-744 (105-132). During this period, the Muslims expanded out of Spain and into France until their advance was finally stopped by the Franks in 736.

When Hisham died in 743, the empire collapsed into a series of rebellions mostly by disaffected non-Arabs and by the Kharjites. It was one such rebellious group, the 'Abassids, that would finally overthrow the dynasty. The 'Abassids were descendants of al-Abbas, the paternal uncle of Muhammad. Like the followers of 'Ali and the Kharjites, the 'Abassids believed that the spirit of Islam had been betrayed by the secular-minded Umayyads -- as relatives of Muhammad, their pietism had a concrete character to it.

It was when the 'Abassids allied themselves with the 'Alids that the death-knell of Umayyad power was sounded. With their combined forces, they defeated the last of the Marwani calphis, Marwan II (744-750/127-32), who was later murdered. The leader of the 'Abassids, Abu'l-'Abbas, went about systematically and ruthlessly killing as many Umayyads as he could find.

Shi'a

Shi'a Islam is the only major schism in Islam. It is not a recent schism, however, for it dates back right to the foundations of Islam. Shi'ite historians believe that Shi'ism began shortly after the death of Muhammad, when the Caliphate, or secular leadership of Islam, was handed to Muhammad's father-in-law, Abu Bakr, rather than 'Ali, Muhammad's chosen successor. The Muslims who supported 'Ali called themselves the "Partisans of 'Ali" (*Shi'a 'Ali*); these supporters, who were only four in number, are the root of Shi'a Islam. Western and Sunni historians date Shi'ism as a religion to the death of Husayn, the grandson of Muhammad, in the battle of Karbala. The celebration of this martyrdom by the *Shi'a 'Ali* represents for these historians the first clear instance of separate religious practice.

However that may be, Shi'a Islam is a crucial part of the Islamic tapestry throughout the history of Islam. World history textbooks tend to blissfully ignore the Shi'ite adventure through history, but the minority Shi'ites have played a determining role in Islamic and world history. Most recently, Shi'ism has given rise to a new Islamic political theory called *velayat-i faqih* , or "rule by jurisprudence" (Westerners call it "Islamic Republicanism"). *Velayat-i faqih* is perhaps the most important Islamic innovation of our century; it may be very possible that by the end of the century, the bulk of the Islamic world will be practicing it in one form or another. Or maybe not. You're sitting at one of these great moments in history, in which an entirely new way of conducting human culture and human business has been invented in your

lifetime. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 may turn out to be the most significant event in Islamic history for the last five centuries. Or it may not. The Revolution and the political theory it spawned, however, are continuing evidence of the crucial role that Shi'ism plays in the global community.

'Ali

The foundational figure in Shi'a history is 'Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of Muhammad. After the death of Muhammad, rival claims were put forth for the caliphate which was the office that was the supreme secular authority of Islam. In Shi'a history, Muhammad designated 'Ali as his successor, so that all the others who served in this capacity were illegitimate. The "Partisans of 'Ali," *Shi'a 'Ali* in the struggle to get 'Ali in the Caliphate and in the civil war that broke out when 'Ali was finally named Caliph gave the name to the religious schism that divided the Islamic world from the very beginning. Eventually the Shi'ites would develop a religious doctrine that differs in fundamental respects from orthodox, or Sunni Islam. Nevertheless, at the cornerstone of Shi'a history is the figure of 'Ali and his persecution by the illegitimate caliphs.

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From this point onwards, authority was divided in the Islamic world. The Umayyads continued as caliphs; but there now existed in Iraq a separate Islamic community that did not recognize the authority of the Umayyad Caliphs. Rather they recognized only the successors to 'Ali as authorities, and they gave these successors the title **Imam**, or spiritual leader of Islam, both to differentiate their leaders from the more worldly and secular Umayyads. They called themselves Shi'a 'Ali, or "The Partisans of 'Ali," and are called by historians, **'Alids**.

Husayn

In Shi'ite history, 'Ali is the first Imam and was followed by a grand total of eleven Imams, who passed the Imamate down to their sons in hereditary succession. However, the most important Imam of Shi'a was Husayn, whose martyrdom at Karbala is the most important event in the Shi'a experience of history. Husayn was killed by Yazid, the second Umayyad caliph, because of the growing threat the 'Alids posed to caliphal power. The successful massacre of Husayn and his followers was in part due to the failure of Shi'ites to rally to their Imam—so the martyrdom of Husayn represented to Shi'ites both the illegitimacy of Islamic authority *and* Shi'ite failure to bring about legitimate Islamic rule.

The Imamate

From the abdication of 'Ali onwards, authority was divided in the Islamic world. The Umayyads continued to pass the Caliphate down through the ages among their family; but their now existed in Iraq a separate Islamic community that did not recognize the authority of the Umayyad Caliphs. Rather they recognized only the successors to 'Ali as authorities, and they gave these successors the title **Imam**. A grand total of eleven Imams succeeded 'Ali (ten in non-Shi'ite histories), passing the Imamate down to their sons in hereditary succession. However, the eleventh Imam (the tenth Imam to succeed 'Ali), Hasan al-Askari, died without a son, and the Shi'ites were thrown into disarray. Shi'a Islam divided into several different sects, the most important of which was the Qat'iyya ("those who are certain"). The Qat'iyya believed that Hasan al-Askari did indeed have a son, Muhammad al-Mahdi; one of the Qat'iyya sects believed that Muhammad al-Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, had hidden himself and remained in hiding. This sect was called Ithna-'Ashari (Twelver) or Imami (Imam) Shi'a, and was the form of Shi'a that eventually

came to exclusively represent Shi'ism. When you say Shi'a, you really mean Twelver Shi'a.

The Imamate is the central aspect of Shi'ite Islam and what principally distinguishes it from orthodox or Sunni Islam. In all other respects, Shi'a Islam is virtually identical with Sunni practice. In the Shi'a concept of the Imam, a central belief is that at no time in human history has the world been bereft of an Imam. The Imam is a gift by God to humanity; he serves as both a guide (*Hadi*) to humans, a Proof of God (*Hujjat Allah*) and a Sign of God (*Ayyat Allah*). The Imams span history from Adam, the first Imam, to the present day; Muhammad himself was an Imam. The Imams, according to Shi'ites, were a light created before the creation—this light was the instrument of creation and is embodied in each Imam. The Imam has secret knowledge of God and creation; the most important of these secrets is "The Greatest Name of God." The Imams are designated or appointed (*mansus*) by God and they are free from all sin or fault (*ma'shum*); therfore, they are the most perfect of humans (*afdal an-nas*). But above all, the Imam is the one who teaches human beings the mystical truths of the universe. The Shi'ites believe that the Imam that the esoteric, mystical aspects of God are transmitted to human beings.

The son of Hasan al-Askari, however, hid himself away from men in order to preserve his life. This last Imam, the twelfth Imam, has been "hidden" or "occulted" and still is alive today on earth. "The Guided One," as he is called, is awaiting the time when he will return, guide the world, and restore Shi'a to its proper place as the universal religion of God.

The Abassid Dynasty

The Abbassids

The 'Abassid caliphate (758-1258) was founded on two disaffected Islamic populations: non-Arabic Muslims and Shi'ites. For the most part, the Islamic impetus to the Abassid revolution lay in the secularism of the Umayyad caliphs. The Umayyads had always been outsiders—as a wealthy clan in Mecca, they had opposed Muhammad—and the secularism and sometime degeneracy that accompanied their caliphate delegitimized their rule for many devout Muslims.

The Abassids took their name from al-'Abbas, a paternal uncle of Muhammad and early supporter of the Prophet. Their close kinship to Muhammad and the position of al-'Abbas as a Companion of the Prophet served them well in gaining support. As early as 718 AD, during the reign of Umar II, Muhammad ibn 'Ali, a great-grandson of al-'Abbas, began to proselytize in Persia to rally support for returning the caliphate to the family of the Prophet, the Hashimites.

What made the 'Abassid seizure of the caliphate unique was the heavy reliance on client Muslims, or **mawali**. The *mawali* were foreigners who had converted to Islam; because, however, they were foreigners they could not be incorporated into the kinship-based society of Arabs. They had to be voluntarily included into the protection of a clan, that is, they had to become "clients" of the clan (which is what the word *mawali* means). For the most part, they were second-class citizens even though they were Muslims.

The overwhelming majority of foreigners who rallied to the Hashimiyya cause were Iranian. Historians have argued that the 'Abassid caliphate represented a shift in Islam from Semitic to Iranian culture; other historians argue that there really no such shift. The truth probably lies somewhere in between. When the 'Abassids took power, the center of Islamic culture shifted from the Semitic world in Arabia and Syria to the Iranian or Persian world in Iraq. By shifting the capital from Damascus to Baghdad, the 'Abassids brought about a dynamic fusion of Persian and Semitic culture.

The dynasty was started when Abu'l-'Abbass assumed the caliphate from 750-754 AD / 132-136 AH. Both he and his successor, Abu Ja'far al-Mansur (754-775 / 136-158), ruthlessly consolidated power and began a series of administrative moves that would characterize Islamic government for the next several centuries. As with Umayyads, they separated themselves from the general Islamic populace, but they surrounded themselves with foreigners rather than Arabs, particularly in the military. This bred bitter resentment, particularly among Arabs, such as the Khorosanian Arabs, that had helped them rise to power.

The Umayyads

The Umayyads, however, did not take being removed from power lying down. In 756, the Umayyads established a rival empire in Spain, though they did not set up a rival caliphate until 929. They

were aided in their seizing of power by Kharjite North Africans and, in particular, Berbers, who had been instrumental in the conquest of Spain earlier. The Umayyad caliphate flourished in Spain for the next three centuries and the Islamic culture that grew on this fertile soil, the Moorish culture, was dramatically different from the Iranian-Semitic culture that grew up around the 'Abbasid Caliphate.

The Early Years

The 'Abassids only came to power with the help of diverse and disaffected populations; even though they consolidated power fairly ruthlessly in the beginning, their control over the world of Islam unravelled quickly. The first threat came with the establishment of Umayyad rule in Spain which, because of its distance, obviated any military reconquest of the area. Soon after, rival Islamic states were set up by Berber Kharjites in North Africa in 801.

The Shi'ites were a particular thorn in 'Abassid rule; the 'Abassids had come to power by using both Shi'ite help and rhetoric. The Shi'ites, however, were not a single, unitary group, and the 'Abassids abandoned their ties to the Shi'a beliefs. Efforts were made to make peace with moderate Shi'ites, but these soon broke down. An uprising in Mecca in 786 led to a massacre of Shi'ite 'Alids—the survivors, however, fled to the western region of Africa, or the **Maghreb**, and established a new and independent kingdom, the Idrisid kingdom.

By the beginning of the ninth century, the caliph's control over the Islamic world was beginning to crumble. It was into this increasingly bleak picture that al-Mamun suddenly appeared.

Al-Ma'mun

Abd Allah, or al-Ma'mun, had not been named as a successor to the caliphate—this instead fell to his brother, Muhammad, called al-Amin. The brothers soon fell out, however, and al-Mamun seized the caliphate in 813. As with his predecessors, he tried to incorporate Shi'ites into the Islamic government, but his entire reign was spent in quelling disturbances among Shi'ites and anit-Shi'ites. He seems to have just held the line in the disintegration of the 'Abbasid caliphate. There are, however, two great innovations that irrevocably changed the course of Islamic history.

The first was a military revolution begun by his brother, al-Mu'tasim. The constant revolutions and the deep division in Islamic society convinced al-Ma'mun that he needed a military force whose only loyalty was to him. So his brother, who would later become caliph (833-842 / 218-27), assembled a military force of slaves, called **Mamluks**. Many of the Mamluks were Turkish, who were famous for the horsemanship. But the Mamluk military also consisted of Slavs and some Berbers. By the middle of al-Wathiq's reign, the Mamluk army had completely displaced the Arabian and Persian army under the caliph. This army, and al-Mu'tasim's abandonment of Baghdad for Samarra, caused bitter resentment among Muslims and would irreperably sever the protective bond between the Islamic sovereign and the Islamic people. It also introduced a new ethnic group in the Islamic world, the Mamluks, who would eventually play a powerful role in the drama of power and decline in medieval Islam.

More importantly, al-Ma'mun energetically patronized Greek, Sanskrit and Arabic learning and so altered the cultural and intellectual face of Islam. He adopted a radical theological position, called Mu'tazilism, which was regarded as somewhat heretical by more orthodox Muslims. Nevertheless, Mu'tazilism had as one of its fundamental beliefs the idea that Muslims should obey a single ruler. In order to facilitate the spread of Mu'tazilite teaching, al-Ma'mun established a university, the House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikma*).

It was here that Hellenistic and Indian works made their way into Islamic culture through a series of translations. Islam incorporated into its culture and belief the philosophical method of inquiry of the Hellenist world—it is for this reason that philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle were passed on to succeeding generations. This incorporation led to a new Islamic intellectual practice, **faylasafa**, or philosophy, based on principles of rational inquiry and to some extent empiricism.

Decline

After the caliphate of al-Mu'tasim and that of his son, al-Wathiq (842-47 / 227-32), the centralized power of the caliphate declined centrifugally. By 945, the area around Iraq fell to a dynasty of *amirs* , the **Buyid** dynasty. The 'Abbasids remained as caliphs until 1030, but they were only figureheads.

Islamic history entered a new phase. The history of early Islam is a history of the spread of a

single cultural force throughout the Iranian, Semitic, North African, and to a lesser extent, the Hellenistic and European worlds. That single cultural force was religious, social, linguistic, and political and was based almost entirely on Arabic culture and world view. In the earliest years, there is a remarkable consolidation in the regions where Islam spreads—there is by and large an acceptance of a central authority, a government structure, a religion, a language, and a cultural chauvinism. During the latter years of the Umayyad caliphate, that cultural and political unity began to break down. The 'Abbasids, in adopting Iranian culture in part and in distancing themselves from their Semitic origins (for instance, by instituting Mamluk armies), further accelerated the cultural divisions in the world of Islam. After only two hundred years in power, the unified cultural and political world of Islam broke down into a myriad independent cultural and political units.

And thus began the **medieval** period in Islam, a period of cultural and political disunity and decentralization. This was not, however, a bad thing; Islamic culture, split into several different groups that were often divided along ethnic lines, expanded the cultural and intellectual richness of the religion. By the end of the medieval period, even the fiction of a cultural or political unity of Islam had been completely destroyed. The historical process, then, of medieval Islam was primarily about cultural and political decentralization—modern Islam would be the history of powerful cultural centers in this divided world.

Arabic Language

The Qur'an of Muhammed, the central core of Islam, is the Arabic Qur'an. Not only is the book a compilation of the speech of God, it is a compilation of of the speech of God **in Arabic**. This speech is in Islamic tradition considered inimitable; any paraphrase of that speech would change the meaning and dignity of that speech. And any translation into any other language would also hopelessly change the meaning of the sacred text. The language of the Qur'an is known in the Western world as "classical Arabic"; among Islamic believers, however, it is known as **al-Arabiyya**.

Since the *Qur'an* cannot be translated into other languages, all recitations of the sacred text are done in the original Arabic. It does not matter if the believer is Arabic, Malaysian, Chinese, or Russian; it is incumbent on them to perform their recitations from the original text. Since recitation of the *Qur'an* is a fundamental component of prayer (**salah**), it is fair to say that almost all Muslims are united by the common knowledge of this one language.

The nature and status of *Arabiyya* in the Islamic tradition is difficult for most Westerners to grasp. In the European Christian tradition, the primary text of the religion has been freely translated. While Jesus of Nazareth probably spoke in Aramaic, the text of his sayings has only been known in the European tradition in Greek—:a substantially different language. This text has then been translated into Latin and eventually into every other European language. The original text, the words spoken by Jesus of Nazareth, are irreperably lost.

Islam, however, can claim to have the very words that Muhammad spoke; these words, in turn, for a believer are the same words spoken to Muhammad by God through the angel Gabriel. In other words, when a Muslim opens the text of the *Qur'an* , he or she is reading the very words that God spoke. This gives the language of the *Qur'an* a sacred character in the tradition of Islam.

Classical Arabic, like its modern descendants (Levantine Arabic, Palatine Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, and so on), is a Semitic language—the same language family that includes Hebrew, the languages of Mesopotamia (with the exception of Sumerian), and other partly Semitic languages, such as Ethiopian. It shares many of the same characteristics of Hebrew and other Semitic languages. However, despite these similarities, Classical Arabic is a highly unique language among Semitic languages.

For lack of a better term, you might say that Arabiyya is primitive language. It seems to be a less modern language than even the languages of ancient Mesopotamia—considering that the ancient Mesopotamian writings precede the *Qur'an* by at least 2500 years, that's pretty amazing. The reason Arabic didn't change drastically from its most primitive forms is that Arabic society tended to remain centered in small groups. It is a linguistic truth that languages that are spoken only by small groups change very little; languages that are spoken by large groups—especially when foreign speakers are

constantly entering that society—change fairly quickly and often drastically.

Why point this out? Roughly speaking, you can consider languages as either based on concepts or based on roots. Almost all languages base meaning primarily on concepts. For instance, in English the word "act" means what it means because we associate it with a concept or a set of concepts. Learning English—or any other European language—involves learning to associate arbitrary concepts with certain words. In a root language, words mean what they mean because they are built off of other words; these base words are called **roots**. Now, while most languages are concept languages, some words have meaning only because they're built off of other words. In English, for instance, if you learn what the word "act" means, you should have no problem when you hear the word "actor"—you use the root to understand the word built off of the root.

Classical Arabic as one of the most primitive Semitic languages is primarily a root language. Almost every word gets its meaning from the roots it is built off of rather than by associating a concept with the word. This gives Arabic an almost crystal clear aspect to it; there is little ambiguity or confusion in an classical Arabic sentence. The language is one of clarity, directness, and certainty—qualities that are hard to achieve in other languages.

The Arabs were largely illiterate until slightly before the Islamic period. The alphabet that was invented for Arabic was a cursive alphabet drawn from other Semitic languages. Like other Semitic languages, this alphabet is immensely complex. Letters take different forms based on where they appear in a word: at the beginning, the end, or in the middle. Like Hebrew, the Arabic alphabet has no letters for vowels. Instead, vowels are indicated by diacritical marks above or below the letters they're supposed to follow.

Because of the importance of the language as a sacred language and the cursive nature of the alphabet, Arabic writing became an art form unto itself. Perhaps the principal art form of Islam is **calligraphy**, or the artistic rendering of writing. Two major scripts developed for writing Arabic. **Kufic** script renders Arabic letters with straight vertical and horizontal lines meeting at ninety degree angles—this gives the written language the character of stability and unity. **Nakshi** script—the Arabic script you've probably seen the most of—renders words with highly cursive and flowing letters. These letters curve and twine around each other and give the language a character of temporality and change. From these two basic scripts arose all the calligraphic arts of Arabic and the Islamic tradition.